Formation of the Fairbury Fair

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The first Fairbury Fair was held in 1876, so the year 2026 marks the 150th Anniversary of the Fairbury Fair. This is the first of a series of articles that will examine the history of this long-running Fair.

Fairbury was founded in 1857 when the Peoria & Oquawka Railroad laid its tracks from Peoria to Indiana. In the 1860 U.S. Census, Fairbury only had a population of 269. Over the next two decades, Fairbury had a boom in population growth with 1,493 citizens in 1870 and 2,140 in 1880.

As Fairbury entered the 1870s, agriculture was the primary industry in this area. Farmers needed horse to farm the land, so several firms were established to sell horses to the farmers. John Virgin (1838-1900) set up a firm which imported Percheron's, large French draft horses, and sold them to Fairbury area farmers. John Virgin also designed and built his unique "Horse Palace" just south of where the Walton Center is today.

The first fairs held in Livingston County started about 1850 and they were held in the courthouse square. The primary force in organizing these early fairs was Mr. Samuel Ladd. But only a few articles were exhibited and at the close of the days entertainment, a hat was passed to raise money to defray expenses. These primitive fairs generally went by the name of "rope fairs" because a rope was stretched around the articles being exhibited.

A permanent organization was created in early 1856. A Constitution was developed and approved for the Livingston County Agricultural Society. The first Livingston County Fair was held in the Fall of 1856, in the Court House Square in Pontiac. No admission fee was charged and a very small list of premiums offered.

In 1865, the Livingston County Agricultural Society purchased the old fair grounds, south of the 'Vermilion River in Pontiac, which they furnished with buildings, stalls and a good half-mile track, and which were occupied until 1878.

In 1872: the Illinois Legislature passed a law changing the State Agricultural Society to the State Agricultural Board, and gave it certain privileges. The same act provided that any County Agricultural Society forming an organization in compliance with this law would be entitled to $100 each season a fair was held.

To be in compliance with the new State law, the Livingston County Agricultural Society changed to the Livingston County Agricultural Board.

There were likely two drivers behind Fairbury starting the Fairbury Fair in 1876. The first driver was the 1872 Illinois State Law which promoted formation of fairs and offered to contribute $100 to any fair as long as they held a fair each season. This state funding would be equivalent to $2,664 in today's dollars.

John Virgin was the second primary driver in getting the Fairbury Fair established. He was nationally known because of his Percheron importing business. John Virgin could promoted his horse business by making entries in the Fairbury Fair and other Fairs in the Midwest.

1876 was a terrible year for Livingston County farmers because of excessive rain and flooding. The Livingston County Agricultural Board recounted that "owing to the unfortunate condition of the county from the long continual rains, and consequent failure of crops there was no held by this Society in 1876."

The men organizing the Fairbury Fair decided to go ahead and hold the first Fairbury Fair in 1876, even though the Pontiac folks canceled their fair.

Unfortunately, we have no existing copies of the Fairbury Blade newspapers until about 1882. The State of Illinois Agricultural Department published annual reports including information about fairs. The 1878 book, which recounted fair information from 1877, covers the second year of the Fairbury Fair.

This book reported that the Fairbury Union Agricultural Board had an organizational founding date of March 25, 1876 and their date of incorporation was on April 4, 1876. John Virgin was President, John G. Steers was Vice-President, Ed Annable was Secretary and C. C. Bartlett was the Treasurer.

About 200 members or shareholders each contributed $25 for the one share of stock they were issued. This raised $10,000 and would be equivalent to $300,000 in today's dollars. This book reported the 2nd annual Fairbury Fair was held on September 11, 12, 13, and 14.

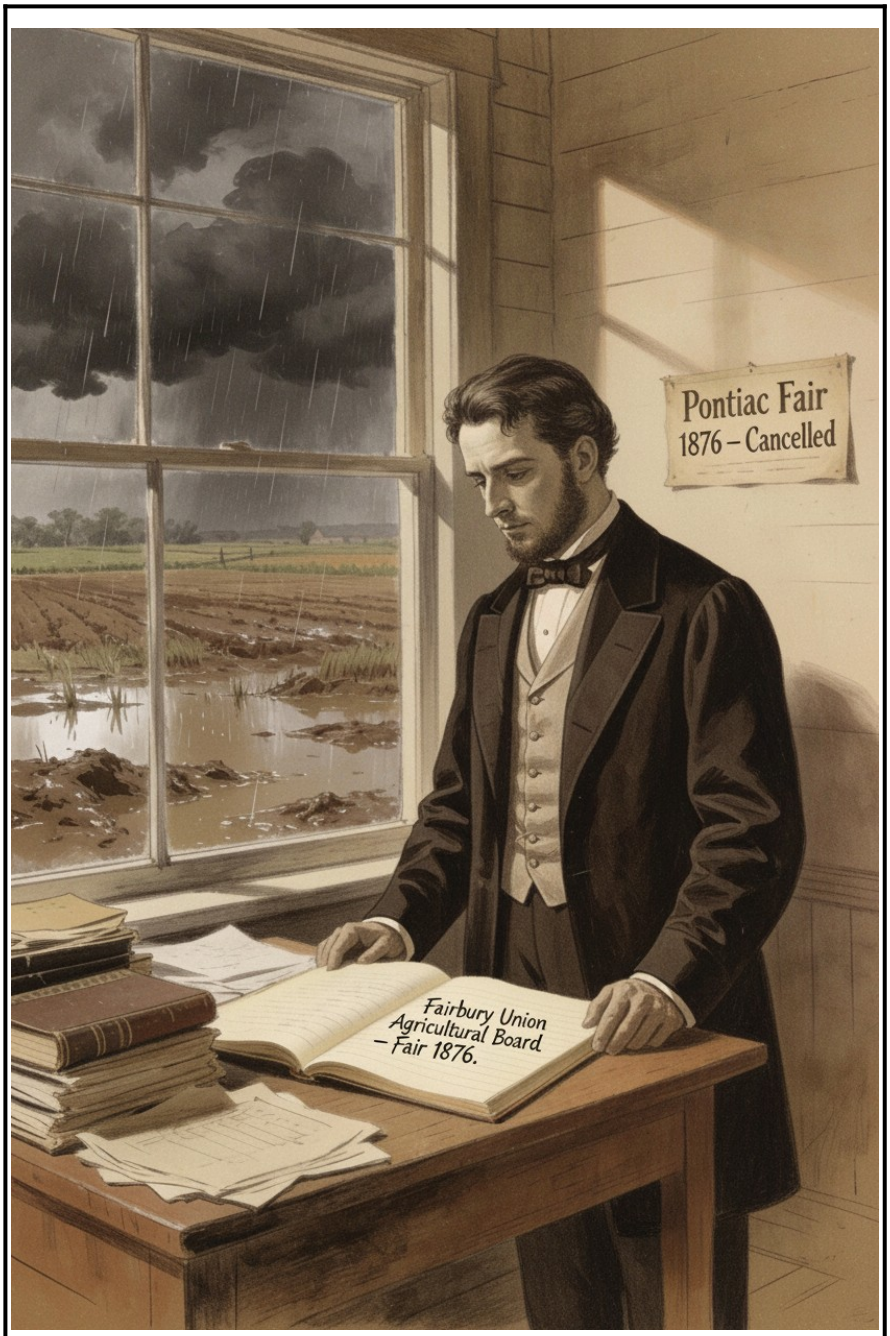
The Fairbury Fair had 13 different departments. The most popular departments in terms of entries was the Horses Department with 334 entries. The second most popular was the Horticulture and Floriculture Department with 291 entries. The third most popular was the Farm Products department had 284 entries.

In total, the Fairbury Fair had 1,748 total entries and paid total premiums of $2,134. These total premiums would be equivalent to $64,000 in today's dollars.

Ed Annable, Secretary, noted in the annual report to the State of Illinois, "We have made considerable improvements on our grounds this year, having set out quite a number of trees, built a number of new stalls and pens and numerous improvement which make a fair ground attractive, which we expect to continue improving from year to year, as occasion may require.

Mr. Annable closed out his annual report saying, “The Success of the past two years has given the Fairbury Fair a splendid reputation and placed it among the established fairs of the State, thereby giving it a start that I can see nothing to hinder making the third annual fair more successful than either of the two past.”

In retrospect, it took a great deal of courage to launch the first Fairbury Fair in a year of terrible weather conditions for agriculture. The Livingston County Fair, which had been going for 20 years, decided to cancel their 1876 Fair. John Virgin was a leading businessman and went on to be involved with the Fairbury Fair, the Illinois State Fair, and the 1893 Columbia Exposition (Chicago World’s Fair). He was a visionary and leader and likely one of the main reasons the Fairbury Fair launched in 1876.



John Virgin had to decide whether or not to launch the first Fairbury Fair in 1876 because it was a poor weather crop year and Pontiac had canceled their Fair.